HERMENEUTICS AND THE CONSERVATISM OF LISTENING

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ABSTRACT: It is well known that philosophical hermeneutics has long been associated in political discussions with a conservative orientation. Many Gadamerians have sought to rebut this suggestion, convincingly emphasizing progressive political dimensions of hermeneutics in general and of Gadamer's thought in particular. One version of the association of hermeneutics with conservatism has been overlooked, however, namely, Hans Blumenberg's provocative claim that the predilection in the hermeneutic tradition for metaphors of hearing and listening indicates that hermeneutics passively heeds and takes in tradition as we would unwillingly receive a loud sound, and is thereby politically conservative. This paper critically responds to Blumenberg's critique of what I call *the conservatism of listening*, and aims to interrogate the extent to which Gadamer's hermeneutics can be characterized by this form of conservatism. Through a consideration of ocular metaphors in Gadamer's thinking, we will discover in Gadamerian hermeneutics a conception of dynamic, constructive, and embodied engagement with historical traditions that makes room for critique. In this way, Gadamer avoids the charge of adhering to the conservatism of listening.

KEYWORDS: Conservatism, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Hermeneutics, Listening, Perception, Vision

Hermeneutics no longer enjoys the preeminent status it did around the end of the Cold War, when Gianni Vattimo pronounced it the "*koiné* or common idiom of Western culture."[1] At a time when history seemed at an end and liberal democracy decisively victorious, the thesis that all claims to truth can be reduced to mere interpretation appeared eminently attractive, at least according to the

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[1] Gianni Vattimo, *Beyond Interpretation: The Meaning of Hermeneutics for Philosophy*, trans. D. Webb, Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press, 1997, p. 1.

"postmodern" version of hermeneutics advocated by Vattimo, because it could provide the proper normative framework for diverse, cosmopolitan societies governed by global capitalism. Indeed, the most influential modern paradigm of hermeneutics, namely, Hans-Georg Gadamer's, has been haunted by suspicions concerning its alleged association with conservative and reactionary politics ever since Jürgen Habermas's landmark review of *Truth and Method*. For many readers, Habermas's claim that "Gadamer is motivated by the conservatism of that first generation, by the impulse of a Burke that has not yet been turned against the rationalism of the eighteenth century" has remained basically decisive.[2] Santiago Zabala, for example, takes as his point of departure in a recent essay the fact that "[Heidegger's] understanding of hermeneutics is more radical, anarchic, and progressive than…Gadamer's conservative hermeneutics."[3] In an age when philosophy faces the demand to think such pressing issues as the eschatological specter of climate change, what use have we today for a seemingly conservative philosophical perspective that emphasizes the authority of tradition and the recovery of the arts and humanities? Does not hermeneutics seem particularly out of step with a time that requires radical politics and practical solutions?

Over the last several decades, however, many Gadamerians have sought to rebut the stubborn perception of hermeneutics as conservative, persuasively emphasizing progressive political dimensions of hermeneutics in general and of Gadamer's thinking in particular.[4] Even if it no longer counts as the intellectual

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[2] Jürgen Habermas, "A Review of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*," trans. F. Dallmayr and T. McCarthy, *Understanding and Social Inquiry*, F. Dallmayr and T. McCarthy (eds.), Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1977, p. 357. For an historical overview of the development and reception of Gadamer's hermeneutics, see David Liakos and Theodore George, "Hermeneutics in Post-War Continental European Philosophy," *The Cambridge History of Philosophy, 1945–2015*, K. Becker and I. Thomson (eds.), Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, pp. 399-415.

[3] Santiago Zabala, "Being at Large: The Only Emergency Is the Lack of Events," *Being Shaken: Ontology and the Event*, M. Marder and S. Zabala (eds.), New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 77.

[4] See works by Linda Martín Alcoff ("Gadamer's Feminist Epistemology," *Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, L. Code (ed.), University Park, PA, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003, pp. 231-258); Theodore George ("The Promise of World Literature," *Internationales Jahrbuch für Hermeneutik*, vol. 13, 2014, pp. 128-143); Paul Healy ("Making Policy Debate Matter: The Hermeneutic Dimension," *Cosmos and History*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2014, pp. 278-299); Cynthia R. Nielsen ("Gadamer and Scholz on Solidarity: Disclosing, Avowing, and Performing Solidaristic Ties with Human and Natural Others," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, vol. 48, no. 3, 2017, pp. 240-256); Tsenay Serequeberhan (*Existence and Heritage: Hermeneutic Explorations in African and Continental Philosophy*, Albany, NY, SUNY Press, 2015, pp. 44-50, 73-97); Charles Taylor ("Gadamer on the Human Sciences," *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, R. Dostal (ed.), Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 126-142); Georgia Warnke ("Solidarity and Tradition

idiom of our culture, hermeneutics still remains, thanks in part to those efforts, one of contemporary philosophy's main theoretical orientations. Here in this paper, I shall contribute to the ongoing debate about the political contours of Gadamerian hermeneutics in an avowed attempt to bolster the political viability of that tradition. Specifically, I will do so by engaging with an overlooked version of the attempt to associate hermeneutics with conservatism, namely, Hans Blumenberg's provocative claim that the pervasiveness in the hermeneutic tradition of metaphors of hearing and listening indicates that hermeneutics too readily heeds tradition and is thereby politically reactionary. This paper will first explain, and then critically respond to, Blumenberg's critique of what I call *the conservatism of listening*, and aims ultimately to interrogate the extent to which Gadamer's hermeneutics can be identified with this form of conservatism. I will initially motivate Blumenberg's characterization of the conservatism of listening with reference to the genuinely "traditionalistic hermeneutics" of Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Oakeshott as well as some passages from Gadamer. But I shall then complicate and contest Blumenberg's critique of hermeneutics by reconstructing three ocular metaphors in Gadamer's thinking that show how Gadamerian hermeneutics is far from oriented only, or even primarily, around metaphors of hearing and listening. The paper ends with a consideration of Gadamer's claim that we can learn *how to listen properly* to tradition. Blumenberg was right to think that there is such a thing as a conservatism of listening, but this characterization cannot encompass the full extent of Gadamer's hermeneutics. Providing a Gadamerian reply to Blumenberg's critique of the conservatism of listening will permit us to develop a unique and convincing political defense, and extension, of hermeneutical thinking.

§1. BLUMENBERG'S CRITIQUE OF HERMENEUTICS

Reducing Hans Blumenberg to the status of a critic of hermeneutics does not do justice to the fact that he counts, in my view, as one of the most original thinkers in recent European philosophy, as is increasingly being recognized in Germany.[5]

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in Gadamer's Hermeneutics," *History and Theory*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2012, pp. 6-22); and Gail Weiss (*Refiguring the Ordinary*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2008, pp. 99, 116-117).

[5] See Kurt Flasch, *Hans Blumenberg: Philosoph in Deutschland: Die Jahre 1945 bis 1966*, Frankfurt, V. Klostermann, 2017.

But one valence of his originality emerges in a highly critical, albeit veiled, discussion of hermeneutics. The claim that philosophical hermeneutics counts as inherently conservative usually takes its point of departure, as in the passages from Habermas and Zabala cited above, from Gadamer's treatment of our limited ability to critically reflect on and overcome authority and prejudice. Gadamerian hermeneutics, these readers suggest, encourages a reactionary observance and acceptance of tradition. Blumenberg approaches this same general theme from the unique point of view of his analysis of the employment by hermeneutical thinking in general (though not by Gadamer in particular) of metaphors of hearing and listening. Blumenberg claims that the purportedly anti-ocular orientation of hermeneutics opens that tradition up to a serious political problem:

> Metaphors of "hearing" are also significant for grasping the phenomenon of *tradition*…In judging the value of tradition, a teleological moment is always implied, namely, that "truth" is *intended for man* and that it is for that reason that it reaches him via the precarious stream of cultural transference. The denial of vision that is entailed in listening to tradition always includes an element of teleological trust that "theoretically" cannot be justified. For this reason, in the attitude of "hearing" (i.e., in being dependent on tradition), there is often a hidden insufficiency.[6]

This passage, rich with criticisms of hermeneutics but elliptical in its articulation of them, invites close attention. First, Blumenberg implies that an orientation toward auditory and aural metaphors entails a "denial of vision." In other words, the auditory and the visual are mutually exclusive as governing metaphorical fields. That ultimately untenable disjunction collapses, I shall argue, in Gadamer's case. Second, Blumenberg suggests that metaphors of listening and hearing go hand in hand with a conservative acceptance of, and even obedience toward, tradition. Blumenberg, in effect, likens the passive acceptance of tradition to feeling overwhelmed by a particularly loud sound. Listening to a loud sound that you cannot stop yourself from hearing is not the same as assenting to hearing that sound, let alone judging the sound aesthetically pleasing or rationally

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[6] Hans Blumenberg, "Light as a Metaphor for Truth: At the Preliminary Stage of Philosophical Concept Formation," trans. J. Anderson. *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, D. Levin (ed.), Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1993, pp. 48-49. Lest this passage from Blumenberg be thought too idiosyncratic or singular, another version of this same type of criticism, this time more explicitly directed at Heidegger and Gadamer, is also offered by Andrew Bowie, *From Romanticism to Critical Theory: The Philosophy of German Literary Theory*, London, Routledge, 1997, pp. 285-286.

subscribing to its discursive content. The purported link between listening and conservatism follows, then, from the phenomenological—albeit disputable, as we shall later see—claim that we cannot control what we hear; we are, this argument controversially suggests, passively at the mercy of sound. Furthermore, in a quite general repudiation of conservative thinking, Blumenberg suggests here that this acceptance of tradition cannot be justified, and even hints that such an acceptance would be *ipso facto* irrational. For Blumenberg, then, auditory and aural metaphors at bottom imply a fundamentally passive and conservative reception of tradition—a conservatism of listening. To the extent that hermeneutics encourages us to listen to the past, then, like all modes of hearing, this perceptual act of merely listening to and passively taking in the truths of tradition will in the end dissuade us from dynamically reflecting on and critically engaging with the past. Though Blumenberg's paper was published in 1957, meaning that this passage was likely not directed at Gadamer *per se* (since Gadamer published the systematic statement of his hermeneutics, *Truth and Method*, in 1960), this critique certainly might be seen as applicable to Gadamer's hermeneutics in particular, since his philosophical conception of listening does, as we shall soon see, suggest a positive stance toward tradition.

These appear to be powerful and potentially far-reaching criticisms. In the remainder of this paper, Blumenberg's critique, which richly deserves the attention of researchers in hermeneutics, will frame my discussion, but I will complicate his reading in numerous ways and will by no means accept his characterization either of hermeneutics or of human perception. Blumenberg's argument implies that Gadamer's predominantly auditory hermeneutics encourages us to conservatively heed the call of tradition. What if Gadamer's hermeneutics were not, in fact, anti-ocular, however? As I will indicate, his writings, like those of other hermeneutical thinkers, contain numerous auditory metaphors and motifs. But, as I shall emphasize, Blumenberg's suggestion that metaphors of listening and seeing can only compete with one another simply does not stand up to scrutiny—either on purely phenomenological grounds, as I will briefly suggest, or, more importantly for our purposes here, as a reading of Gadamer's hermeneutics.[7] In fact, I will show that, alongside the aural and

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[7] Georgia Warnke's thesis that, in developing a mode of "social and ethical perception," Gadamer's thought is compatible with ocular metaphors helped inspire my argument here ("Ocularcentrism and Social

auditory elements of his thinking, Gadamer also retrieves numerous important metaphors that are crucially ocular in orientation. I hope ultimately to show that this overlooked ocular register of Gadamer's thought rebuts Blumenberg's misguided critique of the auditory conservatism of hermeneutics. To the extent that Gadamer's hermeneutics is not hostile to the ocular, I shall argue, his position will avoid Blumenberg's charge of conservatism. As we shall see, responding to the political objection to hermeneutics that is represented by this passage from Blumenberg will ultimately reveal a new and suggestive means of mounting a political defense of hermeneutics rooted in the richly varied perceptual metaphors that Gadamer employs.

§2. TRADITIONALISTIC HERMENEUTICS

But before defending Gadamer from Blumenberg's critique, I want first to motivate the real insight of Blumenberg's association of the auditory and aural dimensions of hermeneutics with conservatism with reference to two writers, Michael Oakeshott and Alasdair MacIntyre, who advance versions of what I shall call *traditionalistic hermeneutics*. Characterizing this form of hermeneutical thought will permit us to develop an even stronger subsequent defense of Gadamerian hermeneutics, one that directly takes on Blumenberg's critique. By "traditionalistic hermeneutics," I mean philosophies of interpretation and understanding that tend toward a politics of the conservation of tradition in the form of either the rejuvenation of a pre-modern tradition (MacIntyre) or an affirmation of an existing tradition (Oakeshott).[8] We turn first to MacIntyre, whom we should certainly acknowledge as an ideologically heterogeneous thinker whose own political activities and writings, in the course of his long

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Criticism," *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, D. Levin (ed.), Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1993, p. 289).

[8] An account of MacIntyre and Oakeshott that is consonant with (though not identical to) my own here can be found in Mark T. Mitchell's recent enlistment of these two philosophers into his model of the cultural conservation and maintenance of tradition and the development of a corresponding right-wing "critique of the liberal self" (*The Limits of Liberalism: Tradition, Individualism, and the Crisis of Freedom*, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 2019, p. 199). In their study of communitarian political theory, Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift also identified MacIntyre, in particular, as an anti-modern thinker: "Despite important shifts in the critique of liberal political theorizing in his later writings, MacIntyre still cleaves to the almost-apocalyptic vision of modern moral culture with which *After Virtue* is imbued" (*Liberals and Communitarians*, Second Edition, Malden, MA, Blackwell, 1996, p. 101).

career, have often made him an ally of radical left-wing political practice and an opponent of capitalism. But for our particular purposes here, MacIntyre's thinking counts as hermeneutically traditionalistic insofar as he articulates, first, a harshly negative critique of the modern age, which he identifies with "a multiplication of rival standpoints concerning a wide range of subject matters, none of them able to provide the resources for their own final vindication and the overthrow of their competitors."[9] MacIntyre criticizes modernity for its inherent inability to develop a neutral and rational framework with which to definitively settle moral, political, epistemic, and philosophical disputes, which accounts for the seemingly endless struggles across modern culture to reach consensus about such diverse controversies as abortion or epistemology. Because we lack a single vocabulary with which to adjudicate these debates, we moderns, whether we admit it or not, will always find ourselves unable to escape the quicksand of relativism.

The goal of a complete and neutral framework, which modern philosophy has quixotically but misguidedly pursued, is for MacIntyre impossible because "without…a pre-rational commitment, no reason will count as a good reason."[10] This reference to the need for "a pre-rational commitment" suggests not only MacIntyre's well-known Catholic faith, but also his thesis that human beings are (as per the title of his 1999 book) "dependent rational animals." This recognition of our vulnerability recalls Blumenberg's reference to the "hidden insufficiency" always implied in hermeneutical accounts of the human relationship to tradition. According to MacIntyre, our irreducible human vulnerability includes our embeddedness within a social fabric of dialogue and conversation in which we communally shape our intelligible worlds by giving and asking for reasons. In a manner again reminiscent of Blumenberg's discussion of hermeneutics, MacIntyre describes our human quest for intelligibility through metaphors of the voice and of dialogue. He suggests that, in my immature phase of moral development, before I have fully developed my practical reason, "I am not a voice, but an echo. I still have to learn to speak with my own voice."[11] The full

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[9] Alasdair MacIntyre, "Relativism, Power, and Philosophy," *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?*, K. Baynes, J. Bohman, T. McCarthy (eds.), Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1987, p. 402.

[10] Ibid, p. 405.

[11] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues*, Chicago and La Salle, Open Court, 1999, p. 148.

development of human practical reason, developed through conversation in which we cooperatively and dialogically achieve a sense of rationality, will include my recognition of my dependence and reliance on my fellow human beings: "In achieving accountability we will have learned not only how to speak to, but also how to speak for the other."[12] MacIntyre construes the human condition of vulnerable dependence and interconnectedness in terms of conversation, dialogue, and the voice.

We are now in a position to grasp why I categorize MacIntyre here as a traditionalistic hermeneutical philosopher. He begins with a critique of modernity's dangerously excessive pluralism of modes of justification, which inevitably leads to a state of relativism. Armed with this pessimistic and critical diagnosis of the modern age, he then develops an account of human vulnerability and dependency, which for him imply our need to engage in conversation by which we collaboratively achieve practical reason and develop our own voice. Blumenberg's astute critique of metaphors of hearing and listening in hermeneutics anticipated why MacIntyre, who avowedly rejects the modern age's autonomous and secular rationality in favor of emphasizing our finite dependence on tradition, would reach for metaphors of the voice and of dialogue. We also discern this preference for auditory metaphors in traditionalistic hermeneutics even more clearly in Oakeshott's image of human culture as "the conversation of mankind," our second example of the conservatism of listening: "As civilized human beings, we are the inheritors, neither of an inquiry about ourselves and the world, nor of an accumulating body of information, but of a conversation, begun in the primeval forests and extended and made more articulate in the course of centuries. It is a conversation which goes on both in public and within each of ourselves."[13] Oakeshott conceives of human civilization as an endless and playful conversation between different "voices," or modes of human expression, including politics, science, and poetry, although "none has natural superiority, let alone primacy."[14] The ongoing, infinite interchange between these competing but never wholly dominant voices takes place without goal, objective, or endpoint. The hermeneutical motif of conversation as a

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[12] Ibid, p. 150.

[13] Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, London, Methuen, 1962, p. 199.

[14] Ibid, p. 241.

description of tradition, to which Blumenberg called attention in his reference to the hermeneutical emphasis on "the precarious stream of cultural transference," prominently recurs in Oakeshott.

Oakeshott's conservatism operates here not in any overtly ideological register—since he vociferously denies that either politics or science should take precedence over poetry, or the imaginative arts, and he avowedly intends to halt the hierarchical ordering that modern culture imposes on our conversation—but rather within the ostensibly apolitical metaphor of conversation itself. He defines the conversation of mankind in terms of our common inheritance of culture. For Oakeshott, conversation names our reception and maintenance of tradition: "The greater part of what we have is not a burden to be carried or an incubus to be thrown off, but an inheritance to be enjoyed."[15] The metaphor of the conversation of mankind implies that we act as faithful stewards of a cultural tradition in which, through our contributions to the conversation, we participate and which we continue and, in turn, make our own. We keep our inheritance of a cultural tradition endlessly ongoing—without radical critique, rupture, or departure, but rather by merely receiving, extending, and deepening the conversation. Like MacIntyre's employment of the metaphor of speaking with our own voice, Oakeshott's conception of the conversation of mankind forms part of a traditionalistic hermeneutical philosophy that advocates, through aural and auditory metaphors, the conservation of tradition. Both Oakeshott and MacIntyre fall prey to, and thus also more fully exemplify in turn, what I am calling, following Blumenberg, the conservatism of listening.

§3. GADAMER'S AUDITORY HERMENEUTICS

I shall soon argue that neither of these versions of the conservatism of listening—MacIntyre's strongly negative critique of the relativism endemic to secular modernity, Oakeshott's endless affirmation of our cultural inheritance—fully applies to or captures Gadamerian hermeneutics. These examples demonstrate, however, that Blumenberg was onto something in his reading of the conservatism of listening in hermeneutics. Blumenberg's characterization of hermeneutics demands, then, a critical response. In order to provide the most convincing

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[15] Ibid, p. 113.

possible Gadamerian reply to Blumenberg's critique, I want initially to acknowledge the way Gadamer does, at times, seem, like MacIntyre and Oakeshott, to adhere to the conservatism of listening. In Martin Jay's judgment, which echoes Blumenberg's earlier discussion, "hermeneutic thinkers from Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey to Gadamer have trusted more in the word than the image."[16] Numerous features of Gadamer's thinking lend themselves to this appraisal of his relationship to vision and the ocular, beginning with the obvious observation that hermeneutics traditionally refers to the study of the interpretation of texts. In its inextricable link with reading, hermeneutics involves, and indeed requires, careful hearing and listening. For Gadamer's phenomenological hermeneutics of faith or trust, interpretation and understanding require above all listening faithfully and attentively to what some hermeneutic phenomenon, such as a text, has to say.[17] This striking metaphorical model of hermeneutical understanding as a sort of listening suggests, perhaps, a hermeneutical preference for the ear over the eye. Gadamerian hermeneutics requires attentively listening to those phenomena that demand our understanding.

Given his view of hermeneutics as involving a kind of faith or trust, Gadamer underscores "the primacy of hearing [as] the basis of the hermeneutical phenomenon."[18] Because he models hermeneutics on the metaphorical task of faithfully listening to what phenomena like texts have to say, Gadamer prominently identifies hermeneutics with our human faculties of and capacity for listening: "The hermeneutical experience also has its own rigor: that of uninterrupted [*unbeirrbaren*] listening."[19] Gadamer argues here that the demand to listen dutifully to the weight of the authority of the past, even when it appears

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[16] Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1994, p. 265.

[17] Paul Ricoeur famously distinguishes between the *hermeneutics of suspicion*, identified with Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, on the one hand, and the *hermeneutics of faith or trust*, exemplified by phenomenology, on the other (*Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. D. Savage, New Haven, CT and London, Yale University Press, 1970, pp. 20-36). Gadamer appears to accept the basic structure of Ricoeur's well-known distinction ("The Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *Man and World*, vol. 17, no. 3–4, 1984, pp. 312, 318).

[18] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, second revised edition, trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. Marshall, New York, Continuum, 2004, p. 458; *Gessammelte Werke 1: Hermeneutik I. Wahrheit und Methode: Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1990, p. 466. Henceforth abbreviated as TM and GW1. I frequently modify translations of Gadamer's texts from German into English.

[19] Ibid, p. 461; p. 469.

alienated from and foreign to us, is even more primordial than hermeneutical attention to written texts. This human openness to the past—on analogy with our auditory vulnerability to sound—predates, or at least is more elemental to human existence than, the historical innovation of the written word. Gadamer's hermeneutics does justice to this fundamental, unavoidable, and indeed almost physiological need to hear what the history of human consciousness has to say. This model of a hermeneutics of faith or trust follows also from Gadamer's conception of phenomenology as remaining "faithful to givenness."[20] Phenomenological hermeneutics requires faithfully listening to the history that, in our facticity, we inevitably receive and to which we always remain open and even vulnerable.

Listening metaphorically captures our unavoidable openness and receptivity to the past, a feature of hearing emphasized in another register by Hans Jonas's phenomenology of the senses. As Jonas argues, seeing—which we to some extent control, not only when we willfully open and close our eyes, but also when we actively or spontaneously direct our sight toward what we positively desire to see—excludes the passivity or receptivity inherent to hearing.[21] Just as our ears, when functioning correctly, are uncontrollably open to whatever sounds lie within range, so too are human beings always vulnerable to the transmissions of the past whose call we must hear. Gadamer also gestures toward this version of the apparent difference between modes of human perception when he proclaims "the priority of hearing over sight."[22] To the extent that hermeneutics names our attempt to understandingly come to grips with the past whose transmissions we must receive, then hearing, which is—only seemingly, as we shall see—always more open and receptive than vision, becomes the hermeneutically primary sense. Listening, when compared with vision, purportedly counts as the more receptive mode of human perception, and so evokes the proper connotation of dutifully and attentively listening to what tradition has to say. But, as I will now emphasize, these auditory figures do not exhaust Gadamer's employment of concepts and motifs drawn from the full scope of human perception, a feature of

[20] Gadamer, "The Hermeneutics of Suspicion," p. 318.

[21] Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*, Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 2001, pp. 139-140.

[22] Gadamer, TM, p. 458; GW1, p. 466.

Gadamer's work that belies any all too quick suggestion that his hermeneutics problematically ignores or overlooks the human body.[23]

§4. GADAMER'S OCULAR METAPHORS

Given these strongly auditory dimensions of Gadamer's thinking, we might then suppose that Gadamer, like Oakeshott and MacIntyre, betrays his allegiance to the conservatism of listening. I will now defend Gadamer from this charge by responding, in particular, to Blumenberg's reference to "the denial of vision that is entailed in listening to tradition." I shall argue against Blumenberg's characterization by drawing out three ocular metaphors operative in Gadamer's thinking, which will go some length toward unearthing overlooked political valences of Gadamerian hermeneutics. The first metaphor I want to consider is infinity. Gadamer appeals to the figure of infinity at key moments throughout his corpus to underline the overall goal or ambition of his thinking: "I could, in fact, say, as a first determination of the site of my own effort at thinking, that I have taken it on myself to restore to a place of honor what Hegel termed 'bad infinity [*schlechten Unendlichkeit*]'—but with a decisive modification, of course."[24] What is meant by the Hegelian "bad infinity"? For Hegel, infinity in this bad sense, exemplified by an infinite number line in mathematics, simply goes on and on without end (hence, "*unendlich*"), which underlines the concept's ocular resonances.[25] Hegelian dialectic seeks to capture an allegedly fuller and more conceptually faithful and positive understanding of the infinite as more than just the mere negation of finitude. Gadamer, meanwhile, professes to positively reclaim this idea of a process without end in his account of understanding as an ongoing dialogue. Gadamer rejects the possibility that understanding has a teleological end, such as in absolute knowing or settled scientific knowledge. For

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[23] Here I follow the suggestion of Theodore George, "Birth Cry—Or, the Hermeneutics of Facticity, from the Finitude of Language to the Body in Pain," *Internationales Jahrbuch für Hermeneutik*, vol. 17, 2018, pp. 110-126.

[24] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Reflections on My Philosophical Journey," trans. R. Palmer, *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, L. Hahn (ed.), Chicago and La Salle, Open Court, 1997, p. 37; *Gesammelte Werke 2: Hermeneutik II. Wahrheit und Methode: Ergänzugen, Register*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1993, p. 505.

[25] See Wayne Martin, "In Defense of Bad Infinity: A Fichtean Response to Hegel's *Differenzschrift*," *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain*, vol. 28, no. 1–2, 2007, pp. 168-187. Compare also Robert B. Pippin, "Gadamer's Hegel," *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, R. Dostal (ed.), Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 230.

that reason, he follows the later Heidegger in conceiving of thinking as never completed or consummated in the same way that a particularly rich, polysemic, or unpredictable conversation always remains ongoing. To that extent, understanding counts as endless or infinite. The Hegelian bad infinite provides Gadamer, then, with his central model for the endlessly ongoing dialogue between a person attempting to understand something and the object of their attention that we call human understanding.

We should pay attention to the spatial resonances contained in Gadamer's image of the infinity of understanding.[26] He draws an important connection between the infinite dialogue of understanding and the modern concept of space: "The infinite perfectibility [*unendliche Perfektibilität*] of the human experience of the world means that, whatever language we use, we never succeed in seeing anything but an ever more extended aspect, a 'view [*Ansicht*]' of the world."[27] Gadamer emphasizes here that language never allows us a complete view of the whole world, but only a partial (albeit genuine) glimpse into it. Language offers human speakers particular perspectives on or views of a vast reality that necessarily exceeds our finite comprehension and point of view. In a text from 1990, Gadamer more explicitly connects this idea of language as a view on reality with the infinity of space as established by modern science:

> The world is there as a horizon. "Horizon" evokes the living experience we all know. The gaze [*Blick*] is directed to the infinite distance [*Unendliche der Ferne*], and this infinity [*Unendliche*] retreats from every effort, no matter how great. And at every speeding march, new horizons open up. In this sense, the world is a boundless space [*grenzenloser Raum*] for us that we are in the midst of and in which we seek our modest orientation.[28]

We should hear in this passage's reference to "boundless space" a distinct echo of modern scientific spatial infinity. Gadamer here phenomenologically describes, then, the way that the world that stands before our gaze can never be taken in with any single human glance. As we repeatedly shift and adjust our point of view, the fact of the world's enormity that necessarily exceeds our finite and limited

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[26] On hermeneutics and place, see Jeff Malpas, "Placing Understanding/Understanding Place," *Sophia*, vol. 56, no. 3, 2017, pp. 379-391.

[27] Gadamer, TM, p. 444; GW1, p. 451.

[28] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke 8*, *Ästhetik und Poetik I. Kunst als Aussage*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebek), 1993, p. 345.

COSMOS AND HISTORY

perspective becomes increasingly apparent to us. Yet Gadamer emphasizes in this passage how the infinite space of the universe can, nevertheless, still become a home for us to the extent that we accept our finitude, adjust our points of view, and attempt to see things as best we can from our standpoint of unavoidable and linguistic partiality. Gadamer suggests that the only thing equal to the infinity of space as modeled by modern natural science is the infinity of the dialogue that we are as articulated and championed by philosophical hermeneutics. Our infinite conversation measures up to the task of endlessly struggling to put the meaning of an infinite universe into words, which means no tradition or point of view ever enjoys a monopoly on truth. Language continually affords us glimpses into infinite space.

The next, and closely related, ocular metaphor we detect in Gadamer is perspective, namely, the modern emphasis on the partiality of human perception. His central concept of the fusion of horizons (*Horizontverschmelzung*) contains consonances of perspective. Some commentators read Gadamer as a perspectivalist who abjures any absolute point of view.[29] Indeed, he condemns an absolute viewpoint in the strongest possible terms: "Herein lies the limit [*Grenze*], but also the legitimacy, of all 'practical philosophy': namely, that it does not claim to raise us to the point where we can freely survey an overarching heaven of values; rather, it exposes the supposed search for such a thing as a self-deception."[30] "An overarching heaven" amounts to an illusion in practical philosophy, where we will not find any final set of moral truths, as well as in theoretical philosophy, where Gadamer rejects the possibility of the view from nowhere of modern scientific objectivity. Gadamer's hermeneutical theory of understanding takes its point of departure from the insight that we always approach objects of interpretation from within our own "horizon," a concept he defines in explicitly ocular terms: "The horizon is the range of vision [*Gesichtskreis*] that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point. Applying this to the thinking consciousness [*Bewußtsein*], we speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new

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[29] For example, see Robert J. Dostal, "In Gadamer's Neighborhood," *Dialogues with Davidson: Acting, Interpreting, Understanding*, J. Malpas (ed.), Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2011, p. 173.

[30] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutics, Religion, and Ethics*, trans. J. Weinsheimer, New Haven, CT and London, Yale University Press, 1999, p. 75; *Gesammelte Werke 4: Neuere Philosophie II. Probleme, Gestalten*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1987, p. 202.

horizons, and so forth."[31] Our "range of vision," the particular context out of which our understanding emerges, is always already conditioned by linguistic and historical traditions, or webs of signification and intelligibility, that we inherit and bring to our attempts to understand.

Human vision is limited, partial, one-sided, and embodied. In construing our embeddedness within traditions in terms of horizons, Gadamer aligns his conception of understanding with that crucial perspectival insight. The fusion of horizons then takes place as a collision between the constellation of intelligibility initially possessed by the understanding person as well as the tradition embodied by the object of understanding. Gadamer thinks of this collision or fusion as an endlessly mutable conversation between person and object—text, artwork, or historical event—out of which my understanding dynamically emerges. He construes the two partners in this hermeneutical fusion in the ocular terms of horizons, that is, as ranges of vision that are partial and incomplete but that enable us to see a certain delimited field.[32] The language I speak, which permits me to intelligibly view the world, enables me to understandingly come to grips with reality by handing down to me a tradition, a situated mode of intelligibly seeing things. Gadamer importantly invokes here the ocular metaphorical vocabulary of horizons and views to show that our cognitive standpoints can dynamically shift and change.

I now turn to a third and final ocular metaphor in Gadamer, namely, mirroring, which plays an important role in his so-called speculative theory of language. As Donatella Di Cesare emphasizes, when Gadamer refers to language as "speculative [*spekulative*]," we should recall that "the etymology of the word points to *speculum*, a mirror that can reflect an image."[33] What connection does Gadamer draw between language and mirroring? Here we must begin with Gadamer's doctrine that "*being that can be understood is language* [Sein, das

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[31] Gadamer, TM, p. 301; GW1, p. 307.

[32] For helpful definitions of Gadamerian horizons on which I have drawn here, see Hubert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2015, pp. 110-111; and David Vessey, "Gadamer and the Fusion of the Horizons," *International Journal of Philosophical* Studies, vol. 17, no. 4, 2009, pp. 538.

[33] Gadamer, TM, p. 453; GW1, p. 460. For the reference to Di Cesare, see *Gadamer: A Philosophical Portrait*, trans. N. Keane, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2013, p. 154.

verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache]."[34] Gadamer does not mean with this sentence to imply an unacceptable form of linguistic idealism, although both sympathetic and critical commentators have construed this well-known passage that way.[35] Rather, his philosophical hermeneutics insists only that human beings primarily comport themselves toward reality in an understanding manner. In other words, in our dealings with entities and with other Dasein, we disclose meaning and attempt to make sense of reality such that we can cope with it. To the extent that we successfully understand the meaning of things, we disclose that meaning by trying ever anew to put it into words for ourselves and for others. For Gadamer, language therefore serves an essentially mediating function: "Language is a medium where I and world meet or, rather, manifest their original belonging together."[36] We have intelligible worlds only to the extent that we linguistically disclose and experience things; we mediate the world through language. This feature of our experience makes for one half of the mediation that Gadamer claims in saying that "being that can be understood is language." The other side of this mediation comes in the fact that the world only discloses or intelligibly shows itself to us through language. Since understanding means putting things into words, and since we only ever experience our worlds understandingly, then that suggests that the world shows up for us only in a linguistically *articulable* (even if not always *fully articulated*) fashion. Hence, for Gadamer, language's speculative character means acting as the medium or site of the meeting that continually takes place as human beings and the world continually challenge each other's claims to truth in an ongoing and active exchange.

In construing this mediation in terms of speculation, Gadamer aligns his conception of language with metaphors of mirroring: "The word 'speculative'

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[34] Ibid, p. 470; p. 478.

[35] Gianni Vattimo embraces Gadamer's alleged linguistic idealism (*The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, trans. J. Snyder, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988, pp. 10-12). Cristina Lafont develops a thorough and well-known objection to linguistic idealism in hermeneutics (*The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, trans. J. Medina, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1999, pp. 55-124). Even more demanding of future attention is Claude Romano's challenging phenomenological critique of linguistic idealism in twentieth-century philosophy as a whole, including hermeneutics (*At the Heart of Reason*, trans. M. Smith and C. Romano, Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 2015, pp. 60-61, 485-503).

[36] Gadamer, TM, p. 469; GW1, p. 478.

here refers to the mirror relation."[37] Language and world mirror each other. Just as mirror images ontologically depend on what they reflect, so too does our intelligible world only appear for us through linguistic mediation. We disclose the world through language, and the world appears to us through linguistically articulable experiences. To borrow one of Gadamer's own examples, when the mirror image of a castle appears in the lake, that mirror image requires the physical fact of the castle for its existence.[38] Just as artists, magicians, and scientists invent creative variations on the mirror, so too can our linguistic practices permit us to contribute novel ways of seeing and reacting to reality, never resting content with any single one. The metaphor of mirroring permits Gadamer to illustrate his conception of language as disclosing the world, and in turn for the way that the world requires human language and creativity in order to intelligibly appear to human beings. We can no more willfully impose our language onto the world, by for example designating names for contents that precede our linguistic acts, than could a mirror reflect an image without there being some real worldly entity that the mirror reflects. Such a case cannot, at least, be a paradigm of the human linguistic capacity.[39] The fact that language does not merely and arbitrarily project or impose itself onto reality also implies, in a rebuke now of linguistic idealism, that just as a mirror cannot invent its own image wholesale, so too language does not construct the world on its own, but rather reflects and partially discloses a reality independent of us. The evental interplay between a mirror image and what the image reflects captures this complex relationship. The speculative happening of language recalls the intricate ontological interdependence between an entity and its mirror image.

§5. "THE DENIAL OF VISION" REVISITED

I have argued that Gadamer employs three ocular concepts in his thinking, namely, infinity, perspective, and mirroring. In this light, I want to revisit Blumenberg's claim, in his critique of the conservatism of listening, that the

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[37] Ibid, p. 461; p. 469.

[38] Ibid; pp. 469-470.

[39] Here I follow Charles Taylor's convincing critique of "designative" as opposed to "constitutive" views of language (*The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity*, Cambridge, MA, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015, pp. 3-50).

reliance in hermeneutics on auditory metaphors signalled a "denial of vision." The prominence of these ocular metaphors in his thinking shows that Gadamer, for his part, subscribes to no such denial. Blumenberg implied also that the denial of vision suggests a passive acceptance of tradition, whereas the activity and volition indicated by metaphors of seeing, which we have pointed to as playing such a prominent role in Gadamer's hermeneutics, aligns with progressive political dimensions: "The eye wanders, selects, approaches things, presses after them, while the ear, for its part, is affected and accosted. The eye can seek, the ear can only *wait*."[40] Blumenberg's political critique of hermeneutics rests, we now recognize, on a questionable demarcation between the volitional registers of hearing as opposed to vision. This point about the alleged passivity of hearing, which Jonas also insists on, fails to stand up to scrutiny even on, first of all, basic phenomenological grounds. For instance, hearing the sounds of an oncoming train as they echo in the tracks can permit me not only to merely and passively wait, but also to actively anticipate and then subsequently react to a future and imminent event.[41] As a number of radical political theorists have emphasized, listening—to, for example, forms of avant-garde and politically inspirational music—can actively and crucially contribute to revolutionary social change.[42] To press this same objection from the opposite direction, does not vision also sometimes lend itself to a form of passivity and lethargy? Such scenarios certainly occur whenever our eyes are drawn, as they so often seem to be today, to the seductive but deadening spectacles of television and computer screens and social media on which we dwell and from which we cannot pull ourselves away. We must certainly question, then, the basic phenomenological viability of the analysis of the senses provided by Blumenberg and Jonas that appears to politically problematize Gadamerian hermeneutics. Insofar as this debate about the volitional aspects of the senses bears on a proper interpretation of Gadamer's philosophy, furthermore, I point to infinity, perspective, and mirroring as evidence that this volitional and active valence of perception, which finds its expression in those visual metaphors, also occurs in Gadamerian hermeneutics.

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[40] Blumenberg, "Light as a Metaphor for Truth," p. 48.

[41] The dynamic activity of hearing is borne out by scientific evidence. See Alain de Cheveigné, "Hearing, Action, Space," *Reasoning and Cognition*, Tokyo, Keio University Press, 2006, pp. 253-264.

[42] For example, see the recent study, which draws on and enriches radical political theory from recent Continental philosophy in conjunction with episodes from classical music, by Naomi Waltham-Smith, *Music and Belonging: Between Revolution and Restoration*, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2017.

In a surprising inversion of Blumenberg's critique of the overreliance on hearing in hermeneutics, Gemma Corradi Fiumara appeals to listening as a feminist motif of resistance to Western masculinist logocentrism, which she associates with Gadamerian hermeneutics. Precisely on this count, she argues, Gadamer fails to pay *sufficient attention* to listening.[43] Corradi Fiumara's objection follows from the general connection suggested by other feminist writers, such as Sandra Lee Bartky, between listening and traditional femininity, as seen in the example of the sympathetic wife sensitively listening to her husband recount his daily concerns.[44] For these feminist critics, Gadamer does not evince appropriate appreciation for the receptivity signaled by listening. Following Blumenberg in this respect, and against Corradi Fiumara, I have shown that Gadamer's hermeneutics does, in fact, crucially deploy aural and auditory dimensions to describe our reception of tradition. Thanks to our treatment of Gadamer's three ocular metaphors, however, we must also conclude that Blumenberg's characterization of hermeneutics can only be, in the case of Gadamer at least, in fact irredeemably onesided and unfair. Gadamer by no means accepts Blumenberg's simplistic and tendentious dichotomy between the auditory and the ocular. While Corradi Fiumara is surely right to associate listening with modes of receptivity, Gadamer invokes precisely that valence of hearing in his description of our openness to tradition; and though Blumenberg's critique of the conservatism of listening perhaps does apply to writers like MacIntyre or Oakeshott, Gadamer escapes that objection by including so many visual and ocular metaphors in his writing. My reading has sought to split the difference between the critical reactions to Gadamer's perceptual metaphors by Blumenberg and Corradi Fiumara, and in so doing, to unearth the positive potential of those metaphors by developing a perceptually polysemic account of our relation to tradition, which I think counts among Gadamer's central philosophical achievements.

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[43] Gemma Corradi Fiumara, "The Development of Hermeneutic Prospects," *Feminist Interpretations of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, L. Code (ed.), University Park, PA, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003, pp. 133-137.

[44] Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*, London, Routledge, 1990, p. 103.

In replying to Blumenberg's critique of the anti-ocular conservatism of hermeneutics, allow me to cite a passage from a 1998 essay by Gadamer entitled "On Listening":

> For all of us, we still have something to learn in listening [*Hören*]. Just as we must learn to see, which unfortunately we do not practice enough in our schools, we also have to learn to listen. We have to learn to listen in order not to ignore the subtler tones of what is worth knowing [*die leiseren Töne des Wissenswerten*]—and perhaps also obeying [*gehorchen*]. But everyone should think about this on their own.[45]

Here, in comparing learning how to see with learning how to listen, Gadamer explicitly repudiates any possible imputation to him of a disjunction between the auditory versus the ocular. As we have shown, he considers both faculties important. Unlike Blumenberg and Jonas, and similar in this respect to contemporary analytic philosophy of perception, Gadamer at his best does not draw a firm and likely untenable distinction between the purported passivity of hearing as opposed to the activity of seeing, but rather provides an integrated conception of embodied human perception.[46] Just as he does when describing hermeneutics as a form of listening, which might accord with a feminist philosophy of sensitive and receptive hearing, Gadamer in this passage underscores our need to listen, and even hints at the connection between listening and obedience to which Blumenberg critically called attention. I would insist, however, against Blumenberg's characterization of the conservatism of listening, that Gadamer does not ultimately recommend an uncritical, passive acceptance of tradition. His call here to learn *how to properly listen* suggests, rather, that we must carefully and intentionally discriminate among our inheritances from the past. This task requires, first, remaining open to hearing what tradition has to say so that we can then subsequently think for ourselves, as he insists in the final line of this passage that we must do. Gadamer does not unthinkingly favor tradition, however, just as he does not reflexively reject the ocular. The Gadamerian cross-pollination of auditory and ocular metaphors, which refuses to rigidly and falsely separate human perception between active and receptive domains or modes, symbolizes this dynamic, multivalent, and embodied engagement with historical tradition. As my reconstruction of Gadamer's perceptual model of

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[45] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutische Entwürfe*, Tübingen, J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 2000, p. 55.

[46] See, for example, Mark Eli Kalderon's argument for the activity of listening: "In hearing something we listen along with it" (*Sympathy in Perception*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 141).

hermeneutically engaging with tradition has shown, tradition cannot only be a static and mute object that we merely receive, as we would an overwhelming sound that we must hear. Instead, we engage with tradition in multiple registers and by employing several modes of critical response. Our reply to Blumenberg's critique has allowed us to more fully develop, and even enrich, this crucial Gadamerian insight into the human relationship to tradition, a conception that cannot sit easily alongside any mode of passive or quietistic conservatism.

Blumenberg also suggested, we will recall, in his reference to "an element of teleological trust that 'theoretically' cannot be justified," that *any* acceptance of tradition would be unjustified. Replying to this very broad objection, which would sharply provoke thinkers who direct hermeneutical themes in the direction of conservative politics, may lie outside the scope of this essay. But, on the basis of our analysis, we can see why here Gadamer, at least, would strongly disagree. Gadamer calls us to engage constructively and critically with the traditions we inherit, including the traditions of the modern age, which saw the development of those paradigmatically ocular concepts whose echoes we found in Gadamer's thinking. Not only do we, by virtue of our facticity, have no choice but to take our point of departure from tradition. The Gadamerian strategy for engaging with tradition, though it bears some genuine comparison with conservative thinking and "traditionalistic" hermeneutics, also contains authentically positive, because more dynamic, political promise as well. Unlike MacIntyre, Gadamer does not dangerously reject modernity in an overwhelmingly negative gesture, since his hermeneutics generously draws out the polysemic truths of modernity's intellectual bequest to the present. We have seen this strategy in action here in Gadamer's elevation of ocular metaphors into the register of philosophical hermeneutics.[47] And whereas Oakeshott's traditionalistic conservatism uncritically affirms our inheritances from tradition, Gadamer calls us rather to actively and discriminately engage with those inheritances in order to think for ourselves on the basis of tradition. Gadamer suggests we do so by critically fusing horizons with tradition in an infinite dialogue in which all partners continually challenge each other's points of view and modes of disclosure. The full scope of

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[47] I have sought to motivate this general reading of Gadamer's treatment of modern thought and culture elsewhere. See David Liakos, "Another Beginning? Heidegger, Gadamer, and Postmodernity," *Epoché*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2019, pp. 221-238.

Gadamerian hermeneutics, which includes the auditory as well as the visual, calls us to engage with tradition in a spirit of generous listening—which crucially also includes judicious, informed, and sharp-eyed critique. In other words, Gadamer rejects the conservatism of listening.[48]

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